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ABSTRACT

Noting that most children enter school with a natural interest in writing, this digest discusses how elementary school teachers can become actively involved in teaching creative writing to their students. The digest considers several reasons for teaching creative writing, provides practical suggestions from other teachers about teaching story writing, reports on the effectiveness of peer feedback, and offers some ideas about publishing children's writing. (NKA)

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Teaching Creative Writing in Elementary School

by Christopher Essex

Most children enter school with a natural interest in writing, an inherent need to express themselves in words (Graves, 1983). Couple this with the child's love of stories and nursery rhymes (Who has not seen a group of kindergartners lost in the world of imagination as their teacher reads them a favorite story or nursery rhyme?) and you have the basis for building an emotionally involving and intellectually stimulating creative writing program for your students. This *Digest* should help teachers with that task.

The Necessity of Creative Writing

Tompkins (1982) suggests 7 reasons why children should write stories (these reasons, of course, also apply to writing poetry): 1) to entertain; 2) to foster artistic expression; 3) to explore the functions and values of writing; 4) to stimulate imagination; 5) to clarify thinking; 6) to search for identity; and 7) to learn to read and write.

With these compelling reasons in mind, it is hard to justify not making creative writing an important part of the elementary school classroom day. It is important that the reasons for writing be made clear to administrators and parents, who may automatically categorize creative writing as merely frivolous play, something akin to recess. While writing certainly should be enjoyable, and children should have opportunities to choose their own subjects and methods of writing, the importance of creative writing in developing children's cognitive and communication skills cannot be underestimated (Tompkins, 1982).

By being actively involved with, and actively interrogating their involvement with, the elements that make up written and oral communication, these young writers of fiction will gain an intuitive and intellectual understanding of its operations. This kind of understanding will elude those who merely observe it in its final, polished, presentation. One can best understand how something is constructed by attempting to put it together yourself.

Both the writer of fiction and the writer of nonfiction must put forth a similar kind of questioning of his/her world. Teachers should emphasize that good fiction requires logical consistency and factual accuracy. Creative writers are asking us to believe in their dreams, and this requires that they "get the details right." If a student wants to write a story about a pitcher for the Seattle Mariners, then he/she should know things like: what the stadium looks like, what kind of glove the pitcher wears, how high the mound is, etc. Even stories that are based on fantasy or science fiction, with monsters and space aliens, need to obey various rules of logic; they need to "make sense." For instance, what might the monster eat? What kind of planet would the alien come from? This kind of questioning can open up many new areas of intellectual and emotional interest for student writers of fantasy or science fiction. These are areas that they might not have as easily accessed through other types of writing. Thus, their understanding of their world is deepened.

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Suggestions for Teaching Story-Writing

One of the most difficult questions for many creative writing instructors to answer is, "What is a story?" Most children, by the time they reach elementary school, have been exposed, through first being read to, and then by reading on their own, to hundreds of stories, and they may at this point have an intuitive feel for what "seems like a story" and what doesn't. But this "story-sense" will vary in degree for each student, and it is not something that can be relied upon to occur automatically. A sense of what a story is can be reinforced during classroom reading of stories, and also, importantly, in post-story discussion. If students are led in a helpful way in these discussions, they may begin to see similarities and differences between books of different writing styles and content and will begin to form an idea of the forms and structures that stories generally follow.

Taberski (1987) relates her experiences as a second-grade teacher struggling with the difference between her expectations of her students' writing and the reality of it. She set out, as she says, to "research the qualities of good fiction and then develop strategies that young children could use to integrate these qualities into their own writing." Her strategies are similar to those used in graduate-school-level writing workshops, but are tailored to the unique requirements of the elementary-school classroom.

Graves & Hauge (1993) have students take their growing knowledge of story structure and utilize it in their own creative writing, using an easy-to-understand checklist method. Hopefully, once students are used to the self-monitoring checklist, they will internalize some of the general concepts of story structure and rely less on the checklist.

Rensenbrink (1987) offers a slightly different approach which emphasizes children's personal involvement and

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investment in their writing, and she suggests several activities that will help children keep their natural enthusiasm for writing.

For many children, one of the most enjoyable aspects of writing fiction is that it allows them to create "invisible friends" for themselves in the characters that they invite into their stories. However, to the "outsider"in this relationship—the reader—these characters may come across as flat and one-dimensional, in a word, unrealistic.

Leavell & Ioannides (1993) provide specific suggestions about how to help students create interesting,complex characters. Also, importantly, they describe a method of having children evaluate their own work in regards to the complexity of the characterization.

Feedback

Many teachers, particularly those who did not get take extensive college coursework in English or creative writing, feel unsure of themselves when confronted with giving feedback on students' creative writing. They do not wish to stifle students' creativity or expression of themselves, and may even feel that appreciation of writing is so subjective that comments that are at all critical may be unfair.

The writing workshop, long a standby of college creative writing programs, can also be adapted to teaching elementary students. Having students read each other's work and comment upon it can help both reader and writer. Writers are provided an audience for their work, and, for many children, comments by their peers will be attended to in ways that teacher comments would not. The reader may pick up on techniques of fiction that might not be apparent from reading a professionally published book, and will have an emotional investment in reading and understanding the work that other kinds of reading do not offer. The writing workshop can further the kind of critical thinking skills that students are already being encouraged to use in other aspects of their learning.

Many teachers report on being surprised at the insightfulness and quality of the peer feedback that is a product of the writing workshop. Of course, as with much student interaction, this feedback needs to be modeled and monitored. Lensmire (1994) comments on his experiences teaching 8- and 9-year-olds in the workshop format: "As I shifted control over aspects of the work of literacy to children in this third-grade classroom, children's relations with each other became extremely important for their experiences and writing in the workshop. These relations included the rejection, by children, of members of the other sex as partners in collaborative work, and peer hierarchies granting those girls and boys at the top status and influence, and those at the bottom the brunt of teasing and exclusion." None of this should come as any surprise to one who has regularly worked with children, and this should not be seen as a disincentive to the open sharing of writing in the classroom, but it is important to consider the classroom management implications of creative writing work.

Assessment

As mentioned above, many teachers view creative writing as "impossible to grade," and think that any form of evaluation is necessarily subjective and therefore often unfair. Related to this belief, they think that if students' work cannot be judged fairly, then there is no way of accurately monitoring their growth and progress. Glazer (1994), acknowledges these worries, but argues that assessment can be practical, useful, and fair, providing that the teacher clearly communicates consistent criteria for the work that will be evaluated, criteria focusing on writing skills such as description, organization, and punctuation, rather than relying on the teacher's general "impression" of the quality of the work, or comparison with other students' work. These criteria can be tailored to specific student strengths and weaknesses, and can be modified as the child's abilities develop. Glazer provides an example of a "framework," a collection of several of these criteria that she uses to assess students' writing.

Publication

Many teachers look at publication, in some form, as being a useful and satisfying conclusion to a unit of writing fiction. Having a finished version of the student's work can often be a source of pride to the student, and a way to share the specialness of creative writing with his or her family. Greenberg and Shapiro (1987) discuss specific techniques that will help teachers present their students' work in the best, most attractive fashion. Simic (1993) presents other alternatives to publishing as a way of presenting student work to an audience, such as writing competitions and "the author's chair."

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